

## Seven

# Young people talking about citizenship in Britain

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## Introduction

'Vocabularies of citizenship' and their meanings vary according to social, political and cultural context, and reflect different historical legacies (Bussemaker and Voet 1998; Carens 2000; Saraceno 1997; Siim 2000). They are translated into 'lived citizenship': 'the meaning that citizenship actually has in people's lives and the ways in which people's social and cultural backgrounds and material circumstances affect their lives as citizens' (Hall and Williamson 1999, p. 2). Yet, 'very little is known about the realities of how different people understand themselves as citizens' (Jones and Gaventa 2002, p. 28). This conclusion, reached in a recent review of the citizenship literature, echoes the earlier observation in an empirical study by Conover *et al.* that much theoretical debate in the North about the meaning of citizenship is 'conducted in what is virtually an empirical void' (1991, p. 801). Although there have since been a few studies of how citizens themselves understand citizenship, compared with recent theoretical outpourings the empirical void is far from being filled.

This chapter reports findings from a three-year qualitative, longitudinal study of how young people in Britain negotiate the transitions to citizenship. One hundred and ten young people in the East Midlands town of Leicester, aged 16 to 17, 18 to 19 and 22 to 23 in 1999, were interviewed.<sup>1</sup> There was a gender balance and about one in eight was Asian, predominately of Indian-Hindu background (to reflect Leicester's main minority ethnic community). Given the salience of paid work to contemporary characterizations of citizenship, the group was stratified according to 'insider' and 'outsider' status as a proxy for

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social class. 'Insiders' conformed with a stereotypical model of the 'successful' young person as on the route through A-levels and university and into graduate-type employment; 'outsiders' fell well outside it, with few or no qualifications and a record of unemployment for most of the time since leaving school. By the third and final interview in 2001, 64 of the original group remained.<sup>2</sup>

The study needs to be understood in the context of the New Labour government's desire to strengthen citizenship, and of growing public concern about young people's relationship to citizenship in the face of perceived apathy and disengagement (Advisory Group on Citizenship 1998; Pearce and Hallgarten 2000). The study throws light on young people's understandings of citizenship and the extent to which they identify themselves and act as citizens. More specifically, the chapter looks at notions of 'first class' and 'second class' and 'good' and 'bad' citizenship, and at perceptions of rights and responsibilities. It concludes by comparing the young people's constructions of citizenship with those found in dominant theoretical and political models.

### The meaning(s) of citizenship

Until recently, citizenship has not been a salient idea in the British political tradition. Few people therefore have a clear idea of what it means to be a citizen (Dean with Melrose 1999; Miller 2000; Speaker's Commission 1990). Not surprisingly, citizenship was not part of the everyday language of the young people in our study. Nevertheless, the idea resonated with their own attempts to make sense of their position in society. Five models of citizenship emerged. Moving from the most to the least articulated, these are as follows.

#### 'Universal status'

At its most inclusive, everyone is understood to be a citizen by virtue of membership of the community or nation. In a 'thin' version, this reflected a view that 'citizen' means 'person'. This was the response given by a number of 'outsiders' in particular. For one, a 19-year-old white male, citizenship didn't 'mean owt', but he added that 'it's just a person at the end of the day – a citizen'. For another, a 19-year-old 'outsider' white female, 'it doesn't matter what they do, everybody's a citizen'.

A 'thicker' understanding drew on notions of 'belonging' – to either the local or national community. Two participants summed it up: 'Belonging. I think being part of something ... a sense of belonging' (16-year-old 'insider' white female); 'citizenship is about being somewhere,

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belonging somewhere' (16-year-old 'outsider' Asian female). Overall, there were no obvious gender differences, but 'insiders' were more likely to subscribe to the universal status model and young Asians did so more consistently over the three years. However, in another study in the Economic and Social Research Council programme, African-Caribbean and Pakistani young people rejected the notion of citizenship as a universal status. Instead, 'many were convinced that citizenship was hierarchised and unequal' (Harris *et al.* 2001: 50).

### 'Respectable economic independence'

This model is embodied by a person who is in waged employment, pays taxes and has a family and their own house: 'the respectable economically independent citizen', associated with the economic and social status quo. As a 16-year-old 'outsider' white male put it: 'I think as soon as you're living in your own house, out working, paying your bills, that's when you're a citizen'. A 16-year-old 'insider' white male defined a citizen as being 'a working part of the country', which would mean 'when I've got a house, wife, kids, job going on'. The model underpinned understandings of 'first class' and 'second class' citizenship, discussed below. It effectively excludes many of the young people themselves in the short term because of age or dependence on their parents, and, in the longer term, some 'outsiders' because of anticipated unemployment and their generally disadvantaged labour market position. The young men were more likely to invoke this model; otherwise there were no clear patterns.

### 'Constructive social participation'

Here, citizenship denotes a constructive stance towards the community. This ranged from the more passive abiding by the law to the more active idea of citizenship as responsible practice – helping people and having a positive impact. A 22-year-old 'outsider' white female summed it up: 'A citizen is where you're helping in the community ... You're helping people and you're trying to do your best. Trying to support where you are'. On this basis she considered that people 'who can't be assed to get off their beer bellies and help are not a citizen or anything. They don't care what happens around them'. A 16-year-old Asian male was one of a number of 'insiders' who talked about being responsible and contributing as part of a reciprocal relationship with the community or society: 'Being responsible; being mature about everything and again, not just taking, giving back... It's helping out in as many ways as you can'. This 'constructive social participation' model underpinned notions of 'good' citizenship discussed below. 'Outsiders'